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The Impact of Leadership on the Role and Mission of a Christian College

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THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP ON THE ROLE AND MISSION OF A CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

Abstract: If Christian higher education is to thrive in the twenty-first century, it is critical that retiring leaders of Christian institutions are replaced by leaders who remain committed to the mission nurtured by those who preceded them. This article describes the impact leadership has on protecting the integrity and achievement of the distinctive mission of Christ-centered universities. The author shows how this impact is realized chiefly through the processes of hiring, planning, assessment, and communication and provides recommendations to help leaders of Christian institutions carry out their responsibility to shape and advance their missions.

Keywords: *Christ-centered educational mission, leadership impact, college mission, role of trustees in Christian higher education, guidance for Christian college leadership*

Introduction

Paul Corts, former president of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), writes that one of the top 10 challenges facing Christian higher education today is the need to replace retiring leadership with new leaders who continue to embrace "the historic and holistic" mission of Christ-centered education (Corts, 2009). Litfin (2004) asserts that "if either the Christian identity of [a] college or the responsibility for maintaining (or amending) it is not clear, the college is likely already to be in the process of evolving away from it" (p. 238). A review of recent literature on leadership in Christian higher education shows that if

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Christian institutions are to maintain their unique and much-needed contribution to the diversity of American higher education, it is critically important for faculty, staff, students, alumni, and donors, as well as current and potential college leaders, to understand the importance of mission and the role of leadership in guiding the success of the mission.

Every institution of higher education has some form of mission statement. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2010) define mission as the central educational purposes of the institution that give consistent direction to all aspects of campus life (p. 25). According to de Noriega and Diiorio (2006), the mission is a public statement of intention that reflects the college's own understanding of its identity and provides the "drive and rationale" behind all decision making, priorities, and goals (pp. 41-42). They offer that it describes "what the university stands for, what sets it apart from others and what it wants to be known for" (p. 46). It is a statement that gives meaning to the work of the community members.

The CCCU (2014) website indicates that out of the 900 private colleges in the United States that identify themselves as religiously affiliated, 119 claim an intentionally Christ-centered mission. Although each of these institutions has its own unique mission statement with particular emphasis, the foundation for all of them is a shared understanding of what a "Christ-centered" education means. The distinctive characteristics of a Christian college, according to Holmes (1975), is "an education that cultivates the creative and active integration of faith and learning, of faith and culture" (p. 6). Litfin (2004) asserts that a Christ-centered educational mission means that within the curriculum and co-curriculum the campus community seeks "to discover all that is true, how it is true, how it relates to everything else, and ultimately, how it all relates to Jesus Christ" (p. 66)—through Whom God created the world and in Whom "all things hold together" (Col. 1:16-17, NASB). Dockery (2008) adds that this mission involves promoting "excellence and character development in service to church and society" (p. 23). The responsibility for shaping and then maintaining the integrity and accomplishment of the mission falls to the trustees (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2007, p. 2), who are held legally accountable to use the college's assets for the public good, and to the president they hire to manage the institution. This responsibility is carried out primarily through the processes of hiring, planning, assessment, and communication.

Shaping and Maintaining the Mission Through Hiring

According to BoardSource (2007), trustees are legally responsible for ensuring that the institution "remains true to its mission and purpose by its compliance with all applicable federal and state laws" (p. 25). Therefore, as Dockery (2008) states, a Christian mission must begin with a board of trustees comprised entirely of Christians, "whose primary task is to attend to the Christian character of the institution" (p. 73). He asserts that the board will shape and maintain the college's Christ-centered mission chiefly through hiring senior leadership who are "actively committed to the ideal of a Christian university" (p. 73). Since Christ-centered institutions of higher education tend to be small compared to most universities, presidents of these institutions can have a much stronger influence, sometimes almost singlehandedly, on the college's direction (Adrian, 1997, p. 453). In addition, presidents can hire for other leadership positions individuals who share their Christian commitments. These leaders, in turn, must establish the procedures for recruiting and hiring faculty and staff who are genuinely supportive of the institution's Christ-centered mission. Sloan (quoted in Joeckel & Chesnes, 2010) declares, "If I were to offer only one (there are many) proposition for how to preserve distinctively Christian higher education, or how to preserve the character of a distinctively Christian institution, I would maintain that it is . . . the faculty of that institution . . . [who] carry the intellectual freight" (pp. 179-180). Thus, as Cormier (2009) states, it is critical for the chief academic officer to be dedicated to the college mission, since this leader is responsible for faculty recruitment, faculty development, and oversight of faculty responsibilities as reflected in tenure and promotion practices (p. 95). In other words, the accomplishment of the college mission is greatly affected by the effectiveness of the chief academic officer both in hiring instructors willing to dedicate themselves to helping students learn to think "Christianly" and in providing the faculty with opportunities to become ever better at this type of engagement. The academic leader also has the ability to ensure that the accomplishment of the mission is central to the criteria by which performance reviews of the faculty are conducted.

In a discussion of how important it is that all community members are committed to the institution's mission, Litfin (2004) notes that if the college's Christ-centered identity is to last over time, "it must be able to outlive succeeding generations of its own members" (p. 252). He suggests that faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees must understand from the

beginning of their service that the college is something to which they come to participate, but it does not belong to them (p. 253). Litfin offers that if there ever comes a time that the stated mission of the institution no longer matches their own personal mission, they must not try to change the mission, but leave the college in wholeness for those who will follow them (p. 253).

Shaping and Maintaining the Mission Through Planning

Kuh et al. (2010) argue that every college actually has two missions—its espoused mission and its enacted mission (p. 26). The espoused mission is what the institution publishes about itself, and the enacted mission is what the institution does in reality. Trustees and senior leadership have the responsibility of assuring the integrity of the institutional mission—that is, assuring that the gap between mission and implementation is as small as possible. This integrity is important for several reasons. As Rowley, Lujan and Dolence (1997) point out, "accreditation agencies use the stated mission as a benchmark by which to assess the institution and its management" (p. 155). Peer review will surely uncover inconsistencies between mission and practice. In addition, the mission statement convinces many students and faculty to consider a particular college (de Noriega & Diiorio, 2006, p. 37). If their experiences do not match the stated intentions of the institution, those students and faculty will usually not remain at the college—affecting retention rates, graduation rates, and employee morale. So along with "mission fit" hiring practices, another means that institutional leadership must use to shape and then ensure the integrity of the mission is engaging the college community in regular strategic planning to operationalize the mission for the next five- to ten-year period. The trustees and the president determine the "when," "how," "who," and "what" of strategic planning.

Rowley et al. (1997) suggest that "strategic planning seeks to align the organization with the environment in order to help assure long-term stability and survival" (p. 37). So, as Townsley (2009) notes, the strategic plan must be centered in the fit among mission, services, market, and price (p. 176). Therefore, one of the first steps in the planning process is a review of the mission statement to be sure that it remains relevant to the real needs of students. This step provides an opportunity for the trustees and senior leadership to reaffirm the Christ-centered direction of the institution, while allowing for new emphases within that directional context to emerge as the external environment changes. BoardSource (2007)

suggests that trustees should periodically survey the faculty and staff regarding their understanding of the institution's mission, and if there seems to be widespread confusion about it, they should revise or rephrase the mission to clarify the college's "bedrock values" and identity (p. 14). The chief academic officer bears the responsibility to regularly engage the faculty in academic program planning through, as Hauger (2004) states, "much conversation about the meaning of the [mission] and how to translate it, both formally and informally, into a meaningful curriculum" (p. 83).

With the mission clarified, the president and the board must decide whether to engage a consultant to facilitate strategic planning or to lead the process from within the institution. Levin (2009) suggests that engaging in an inclusive planning process "fosters a greater sense of shared mission and encourages candid discussion" of issues and trends affecting the institution (p. 60). Therefore, most successful planning models direct the president to lead the process by appointing a broad-based task force to help insure proper scrutiny of data to achieve realistic, mission-sensitive planning (Wilkinson, Taylor, Peterson, & Machado-Taylor, 2007, pp. 16-17). Together the president and the planning team determine the strategic direction for the accomplishment of the mission, including specific goals and action plans to achieve each goal. Drafts of the emerging plan should be circulated by the president throughout the campus community for feedback, but the final draft must come from the president and receive final approval by the trustees. Leaders of various campus units are then given responsibility for carrying out and monitoring the tactical actions. They are held accountable to the president, who is, in turn, accountable to the board. However, as Gyertson (n.d.) points out, a president must discern the appropriate leadership motif required to address the institution's circumstances (p. 9). If the institution is facing a need for significant change, the president may decide that a non-inclusive process is necessary for the college to move forward in achieving its mission, expecting the campus to rally in support. Regardless of the leadership motif, the president's role is to nurture the mission and vision of the college and to inspire stakeholders to unite behind them with all their efforts and resources (Gyertson, n. d., p. 15).

Another important part of the strategic planning process is resourcing the plan, not just initially, but throughout its life. Rowley et al. (1997) insist that colleges must focus on what they do before determining how it will be done, so that "resources and budget controls are considered after much of the rest of the [strategic] plan has been explored" (p. 240). Then

the plan is given its realistic, operational shape by the budget. The authors note that "governing boards want to approve budgets that are built on a specific rationale consistent with the direction of the institution," allowing them "to track how institutional resources are being used to achieve strategic objectives over time" (p. 245). In other words, the annual budget process must involve strategic financial planning. Chabotar (2007) defines a strategic budget as one that provides for the implementation of the institution's mission and values and that is structured around its long-term goals, as opposed to being developed annually with little consideration for trends or projections (p. 18).

Shaping and Maintaining the Mission Through Assessment

The consideration of trends and projections requires that accurate and meaningful data are collected on a set of indicators established and clearly defined by the leadership. These markers will reveal the level of achievement of the educational objectives, strategic plan goals, and other performance aims that together lead to the accomplishment of the college mission. According to Elman (2009), surveyed trustees agree that "the best decisions are made on the basis of hard evidence" which accurately portrays the state of the institution (p. 165). Therefore, to govern well, the board must determine the data it wants to review, how often it needs to review it, and the format of the data reports, whether in a dashboard or a dashboard with narrative explanations. Some common indicators boards choose to review to ensure the preservation of the mission include enrollment, admissions yield rates, retention rates, graduation rates, net tuition revenue, endowment, alumni giving rates, and student to faculty ratio (Terkla, 2011, para. 4). Ewell (2006) asserts that trustees are responsible not only for reviewing financial data and strategic goal indicators, but data on student learning outcomes as well. He notes that assessment of learning outcomes is critical to the mission of a college, since it "validates the claims the institution is making about its graduates—claims that if unsubstantiated will affect graduates' employment and postgraduate opportunities and ultimately the institution's ability to attract new students." In addition, trustees can use the information in the monitoring and assessment reports to help them annually evaluate the president, based on achievement of measurable goals, which are linked to the strategic plan and the mission and that the board and the CEO have agreed upon in advance (Laughlin & Andringa, 2007, p. 124).

It is the responsibility of the administration to motivate and support

assessment that is done well and to insist that assessment results are used to direct improvements in the students' educational experience. A study by Kuh (in Kinzie, 2010) indicates that "institutions that excel at what they do in terms of student engagement and success are characterized by an intentional focus on institutional improvement, beginning with the president and members of the administration" (p. 140). According to Nichols and Nichols (2005), among the ten most cited reasons regarding practices that discourage the implementation of assessment are making assessment too much work and inadequate funding and support from administration (p. 45). Therefore, faculty and staff members must be provided support for and training in effective assessment processes, including help to learn how to write what Osguthorpe, Bradley and Johnson (2010) refer to as learning outcomes worth achieving (and teaching)—outcomes of worth to the student and that are aligned with the college mission (p. 123). It is also important to note that since accrediting agencies begin with institutional mission as the basis for their reviews, as de Noriega and Diiorio (2006) suggest, an annual "progress assessment process can become one of the most important pieces of evidence for accreditation," helping "to hold the institution accountable for achieving its mission" (pp. 232-233).

Shaping and Maintaining the Mission Through Communication

Another important part of the president's role that helps to shape and sustain the college mission is communication, both to the internal stakeholders of the college (trustees, faculty, staff, students, parents, and donors) and to the external stakeholders (accrediting agencies, governments, and the public). As Papp (2009) points out, no one is better positioned than the president to provide the board with accurate and timely information about the institution's objectives (p. 97). He notes that frequent and honest communication centered on mission is the key element of a healthy, constructive president-board relationship that is necessary for institutional success (p. 96). Then, since the instructors do the primary work that makes the mission and vision a reality, it is vital that the president develops and maintains a strong relationship with the faculty through effective two-way communication. Harden (2009) states that the faculty expect the president to "create an open environment of optimism, enthusiasm, and energy," which is necessary "to encourage the faculty to contribute to the goals and direction of the institution" (p. 88). The same could surely be said of staff expectations.

In regards to presidents communicating with students, Smith (2009) writes that "modeling, challenging, supporting (enabling), and encouraging are leadership skills that, when effectively practiced, promote student success and fulfillment of the mission" (p. 16). Knobel (2009) suggests that when presidents make sure that parents have a good understanding of the college's mission, how the institution works, and how well it is accomplishing the mission, they gain allies in the recruitment and retention arenas (p. 36). Well-informed parents will influence students' college choice and will encourage students to take advantage of campus resources that will help them succeed, contributing to the achievement of the mission.

The board and the president resource the mission not only by overseeing the budgeting process but also through the communication processes involved in fundraising. Gyertson and Hazen (n. d.) offer that "the president is often perceived as the chief advancement officer, with many of the institution's constituencies rallying only after the president has spoken" (p. 23). They suggest that some of the ways in which a president can assist the work of the college's advancement program include clearly and consistently articulating the reason why the college's mission should be supported by alumni, volunteers, and donors; engaging board members in personal giving and in identifying and helping to build relationships with prospective donors; and establishing the priority goals of the college to be funded (p. 23). Again, the college leadership is responsible for making sure there is no gap between the espoused Christ-centered mission and the enacted mission, by engaging in prayerful, thankful, relational fundraising rather than in transactional fundraising. The leaders must model and train staff to view fundraising as ministry to donors' needs—providing givers with opportunities to engage in God's work along with the college when there is an alignment of their God-given burden with the college mission. Nouwen (2004) writes that this Christian fundraising invites people into community with the college, moving together toward the mission while offering them friendship, prayer, joy, and love (p. 28). The president and trustees also play an important role in thanking donors and communicating to them the specific ways in which their partnership has enabled the college to achieve its mission.

Finally, the president must realize that he or she is the personification of the entire college in the eyes of the public. As Weill (2009) suggests, the president can help the surrounding community take an active interest in assisting the well-being of the college by taking every opportunity to help them understand the institution's mission and its students (p. 117).

Therefore, a president's role includes building relationships with local business and political leaders and being visible in the community, participating in it "with genuineness and warmth and humanity while maintaining a presidential demeanor that is required for authoritativeness" (p. 117). The chief academic officer also has an important role in taking the college's faith-integrating mission to the community by helping faculty make connections that allow students to apply what they have learned in the classroom and serve others through internships or service projects, in accord with Christ's command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39, NASB).

Conclusion

As the previous generation of leadership retires, Christian colleges and universities need new leaders who hold to the historic Christ-centered mission of these institutions and who understand their critical role in protecting and advancing that mission. Dedicated Christian trustees must be recruited to carry out the responsibility of appointing a Christ-centered president who will in turn ensure that senior leadership and faculty are committed to the integration of faith and learning and living. The trustees and president bear the responsibility of engaging the college community in strategic planning, which establishes goals that will help them put the mission into action, and then resourcing that plan. They must lead the way in institutional quality assessment—assessing the achievement of strategic goals that support the mission, using assessment data to inform decision-making for improved achievement, and ensuring that faculty members assess student learning outcomes and use the results to take actions to increase student success. Accountability to accrediting agencies, students, donors, and governments for achieving the mission, as evidenced by performance and learning outcomes, is also a responsibility of the college leadership. Finally, the president and board are responsible for clearly communicating and personifying the mission in their relationships with all internal and external stakeholders, in order to inspire new and continued support for the mission.

Recommendations

The following discussion provides some recommendations to help guide leaders of Christ-centered institutions as they seek to carry out their responsibility to shape, protect, and advance their institutional missions using the tools of hiring, planning, assessment, and communication.

Hiring

Laughlin and Andringa (2007) recommend that every board should develop and govern through a board policy manual that contains all the important ongoing policies a board needs to address and that represents "the voice of the board" to all institutional stakeholders (p. 16). They note that the manual should include such policies as the institutional mission and vision, criteria for new board members, and the job description and evaluation process for the president (p. 21). The published criteria for all leadership positions should clearly indicate that trustees and senior leaders of the institution must be able to articulate and demonstrate a strong identity as a follower of Christ and a commitment to Christ-centered higher education. Since policies are determined and changed by board vote, the mission of the college cannot be altered by the senior leadership and faculty of the college; it must be intentionally changed by the full board.

Litfin (2004) observes that most faculty receive their graduate training at secular universities, where making connections between faith and learning is actively discouraged (p. 129). Therefore, as previously noted, the chief academic officer must not only hire instructors who are committed to the Christ-centered mission, but also provide faculty development opportunities so that instructors may become more skilled at integrating their faith with their teaching and scholarship. The leaders should bring to campus speakers who are recognized to be gifted in the practices of Christ-centered education and provide funding for instructors to attend conferences on faith and learning sponsored by the CCCU or its members. They must also assure that resources are available to help professors present their scholarly work at professional conferences, because, as Gushee (1999) asserts, "excellence in Christian scholarship requires engaging the main currents of thought in one's field" (p. 218). In addition, Holmes (1975) declares that "a Christian liberal arts education cannot be impounded in classrooms and libraries, but must extend itself into the extracurricular" (p. 84). Therefore, senior leaders must see to it that student affairs personnel are provided with professional development opportunities, too. The pursuit of partnerships on various projects through the CCCU consortium, or with Christ-centered institutions around the world, will provide learning communities in which faculty and staff may pursue excellence together in equipping students to become thoughtful, skillful ambassadors for Christ's kingdom.

Planning

As Gushee (1999) observes, the president and trustees may have the ultimate responsibility to guard the soul of a college, but in reality it is a community responsibility, "depending on whether the light of Christ can be found there—from students to faculty, janitors to registrars, trustees to the public relations office" (p. 217). Therefore, whenever possible, community members should be included in decision making. They should be placed on cross-unit task force teams to research and develop recommendations to the cabinet and trustees for dealing with specific campus issues; these teams should insist that the recommendations be mission-driven. They should be engaged in strategic planning. Regular "town meeting" discussions should be held with the campus community regarding the meaning of the mission and the connection between the mission and strategic plan goals. Kuh et al. (2010) offer that, when done well, public conversations about the college's core philosophy and direction tend to strengthen institutional values and help to maintain a clear, shared sense of mission (p. 59).

Assessment

According to Kramer, Hanson and Olsen (2010), faculty and staff will engage in assessment more readily if the process focuses on values and objectives they share—viewing themselves as teammates united to improve student learning and development (pp. 32-33). Thus, it is clear that the first step educational leaders should take to ensure that unit assessments are seen as critical to advancing the college mission is to clearly communicate that this is the administration's expectation and goal for assessment. In order to provide effective institutional support for assessment, Nichols and Nichols (2005) recommend that the president establish a half-time position for assessment leadership and budget for expenses to cover the provision of workshops, development of surveys, conducting standardized tests, and distribution of documents (pp. 56-57). They state that "these funds represent a visible commitment to implementation by the central administration," which is essential if faculty members are to "offer their voluntary commitment of their limited time to this process" (p. 57). Finally, Nichols and Nichols state that the outcomes for instructional programs should be consistent with the institutional mission and goals (pp. 60, 76). Therefore, the academic leadership of the college should work with the assessment leader to develop an assessment form that requires faculty and staff to explicitly tie their learning and service outcomes to specific components of the mission and strategic

plan goals. This practice will provide every employee of the college an opportunity to understand that their work directly contributes to the accomplishment of the mission and objectives of the college.

Communication

Leaders should use every possible means of internal communication to build unity around the Christ-centered mission. The president should work with the college communications officer to send out a regular internal newsletter informing the campus of issues being dealt with in various units that affect the accomplishment of the mission, providing them with the rationale behind decisions, and celebrating success stories. He should visit faculty and staff members in their offices and have lunch often with students, listening to their concerns, acting on them, and offering encouragement. As the former president of three Christ-centered institutions of higher education has wisely advised, "[a president] cannot over communicate" (D. Gyertson, personal communication, January 31, 2011).

As college presidents consider their weighty calling to shape the identity and effectiveness of their institutions, surely their hearts resonate with the words of the Apostle Paul: "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5, NASB). Therefore, the final recommendation is to engage the campus community in another vital form of communication: prayer. Not only must the leaders themselves spend daily time seeking God for all the inner resources they need to fulfill their calling and cultivate the habit of carrying out their responsibilities in a constant attitude of prayer, but they must also encourage the entire campus community to do the same. To help foster a community attitude of daily dependence upon the grace of Christ, the leadership should strongly urge all faculty and staff to attend chapel services with the students. As Holmes (1975) states, "[chapel] is the college community at worship, cultivating Christian devotion, dedicating all its activities to the glory of God, seeking biblical instruction that will guide its life and thought, and reflecting on its God-given calling" (p. 84).

In summary, effective leaders must publish clear hiring policies and provide professional development for faculty and staff that will preserve and advance the integrity of the Christ-centered mission. They must ensure that assessment processes are seen as vital to achieving the mission by everyone in the college community and involve the community in mission-driven decision making. It is also essential that leaders engage the community in regular dialogue and prayer regarding their shared

purpose. Such strategies will help to sustain what Dockery (2008) calls "a grace-filled community . . . in which each person will experience the joy of making significant contributions in the pursuit of excellence" (p. 118).

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